

Cultural Translation through Poetry and Painting:
Gary Snyder and Brice Marden in Dialogue with Han-shan

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Introduction: “Neither Here Nor There”

China has a uniquely difficult-to-define position in Western literary and artistic history. For centuries, the Middle Kingdom kept to itself, locked, closed and mysterious to outsiders. What little information came out of China escaped on the trade routes, the most notable of these being the Silk Road. Since its opening in the 2nd century B.C., the route’s success fluctuated for centuries, depending on Europe’s demand for Asian goods. The Silk Road produced the most economic returns in the 7th and 8th centuries, during the Tang Dynasty, often considered to be a period of luxury and profit for China. But the East-West idea exchange, despite the trade route, was limited and small. For the majority of Westerners, China was unknown and exotic, producing fear and anxiety rather than healthy curiosity. During the Opium Wars of the early to mid 19th century, Western exploitation of Eastern resources made apparent their drastically uneven relationship. The wars culminated in two treaties now included in the group of “unequal treaties” signed between several Eastern and Western countries in the 19th and 20th centuries. The agreements required additional port entries for foreign trade and provided for the cession of Hong Kong to the United Kingdom, among other West-centric benefits.

For most of this history the West has been much more concerned with acquiring Eastern resources and expanding colonially than promoting intellectual exchange. Still, some artists and intellectuals desired to explore this strange world on the other side of the globe. Intellectuals like American Ernest Fenollosa lived in Japan during the late 19th century, collecting art and bringing home tales from afar before taking the head curator’s position of the Oriental Department at the

Boston Museum of Fine Arts. His first show, “the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago highlighted arts and cultures of the East” (Gómez 60) and illuminated a part of the world that, for many Americans, had been in the dark. Visual artists traveled to Asia where they studied its landscapes and people as well as aesthetic techniques, incorporating some of the latter into their own work. These artists and those that continue in this vein in the following years study and work with varying methods of translation and interpretation, affected by a range of presuppositions and cultural identities. Some adhere more closely to the thick invisible line between the East and West, while others blur the division.

Eric Hayot, author of *Chinese Dreams*, situates early 20th century ideas on China in this framework of Western identity that is tied to the lack or inadequacy of information¹. His discussion begins of course with American Modernist Ezra Pound, a poet named by T.S. Eliot “the inventor of Chinese poetry of our time” (Hayot 4) and cited many times over as the founder of modernist poetry in English. Pound’s (in)famous *Cathay* poems, pseudo-translations of Chinese poetry (inventions, as Eliot calls them), reside in the literary canon as some of the finest works of English poetry in history². Hayot points out that “history’s judgment that Pound, despite knowing no Chinese, translated the poems better than anyone else ever has, sets the stage for a series of questions about how Westerners come to ‘know’ China, and how much of

¹ Hayot, Eric. *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel quel*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2004.

² Hayot explains on page 13 of his *Chinese Dreams* that Pound did not start studying the Chinese language until 1936 (the poems were published in 1915), and the foundation for his poems was based on the “notes taken by the American scholar Ernest Fenollosa, who, while living and working in Japan, had transcribed a number of Chinese poems with the help of a Professor Mori and Mr. Ariga. Often following, sometimes deviating from Fenollosa’s notes, Pound worked the word-for-word translations into English poetry. Sometimes he guessed at meanings, sometimes he misread Fenollosa’s writing, sometimes Fenollosa got things wrong. That Pound’s translations are successful has been taken by any number of critics as a literary miracle, by other as a literary fraud.”

that knowledge is the ghostly reflection of their own desires” (Hayot ix-x). Pound’s portrayal of China speaks more to a “stereotyped West whose major characteristic is that it invents Chinas” based on a variety of features including the West’s “imperializing drive, its scientific curiosity, its penchant for exploration, its insistent pursuit of otherness” rather than on its capacity to definitively assert anything about China (Hayot ix).

Instead of assessing the level of “correctness” in any of Pound’s translations, it is more intellectually valuable to use the poet as a starting place for discussion of China and other artists. Even if we concede that these artists’ translations are not accurate or whole depictions of China, their work demonstrates how their backgrounds and experiences shape their individual perspectives expressed through poetry and painting. What does their output contribute to the conversation surrounding *perceived* definitions of Eastern culture, Western culture, and a possible hybrid of the two? In this essay we will explore American poet Gary Snyder’s translation of ninth-century poet Han-shan’s “Cold Mountain” poems, American painter Brice Marden’s series inspired by the same set of poems, and what they bring to the global discussion of cultural translation.

Pound’s literary (as distinct from *translational*) success with *Cathay* opened the door for future poets to present China to successive generations. Kenneth Rexroth, who was 10 years old when *Cathay* was published, became a leftist poet and translator himself. Comparatively speaking, Rexroth practiced more accurate translation methods than Pound; he often worked directly with native speakers and was familiar with the language’s in questions (both Chinese and Japanese) though, like Pound, he didn’t necessarily work directly from original texts. Rexroth and his work were immeasurably influential on the West Coast. Timothy Gray, author of *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim* calls him “the man who...laid the groundwork for the West Coast

counterculture” (Gray 23)³. He introduced Snyder to Allen Ginsberg and is responsible for the famous Six Gallery poetry reading featuring many of the well-known Beat poets at the height of the San Francisco Renaissance. For these reasons and others, some refer to Rexroth as the first Beat. Gray explains that Rexroth’s translations, *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese* and *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* “became best-sellers in San Francisco in the 1950s,” and thus these works along with Rexroth’s personal guidance greatly influenced Snyder’s growing interest in Asia as well as his translation approach to the “Cold Mountain” poems. Much more than Pound, Rexroth placed importance on sharing an identity with the original author, calling translation “an act of sympathy,”⁴ and Snyder, as well as others, latched onto this definition.

One Hundred Poems not only influenced Rexroth’s immediate circle, but artists and translators working in the latter part of the 20th century and in different media. One such artist is painter Brice Marden, whose relationship to Rexroth is far more indirect than Snyder’s personal relationship with him. And yet Rexroth’s translations of Tu Fu, a Chinese poet roughly contemporary with Han-shan, helped inspire Marden to explore visually the relationship between form, function, and meaning, culminating in his six-part *Cold Mountain* series. In 1985, three years after Rexroth’s death, Marden began working on *Etchings to Rexroth*, a series that precedes the *Cold Mountains* and contains 25 small-scale black and white etchings, some fluidly calligraphic like the later six, others strictly geometric, and none nearly as nuanced as and of the *Cold Mountains*. This forerunner series clearly has direct ties to the grander study Marden undertakes with Han-shan’s poetry, and with this in mind, we can say that Rexroth is partly responsible for both Snyder’s and Marden’s trips to Cold Mountain.

³ Gray, Timothy. *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006.

⁴ See “The Poet as Translator,” a lecture presented by Rexroth in November 1959 at the University of Texas.

The original “Cold Mountain” poems are a somewhat enigmatic series, usually dated to the Tang Dynasty period in China (during the eighth or ninth century). Their author is known to history simply as Han-shan, which translates as “Cold Mountain;” his given name and identity remain unknown. Apparently he was a husband and father with a reliable city job who became progressively disillusioned by the daily routine of society and the pervasiveness of materialist culture (remember, during the Tang dynasty, China experienced an explosive period of prosperity and expansion), and thus abandoned his job, family, and obligations to pursue what he defined as a pure, meaningful lifestyle alone. Han-shan then hiked into the T’ien-tai mountain range to live as an ascetic⁵. He is often artistically rendered as a happy, slightly crazed laughing man with minimal robes and wild hair, chubby, though one wonders how living ascetically is compatible with the latter description. Snyder writes of Han-shan and his “sidekick” in a short introduction to his translations. He calls them “Immortals and you sometimes run onto them today in the skidrows, orchards, hobo jungles, and logging camps of America” (RRCM 33)⁶.

The poems are direct and informal, as if Han-shan wants to engage personally with his readers. Snyder describes the writing as “rough and fresh” (RRCM 33), organic and straightforward. The poems present concretely the tangible natural environment of Cold Mountain while shifting seamlessly in and out of Buddhist spiritual truths, matter-of-fact statements on ephemeral matter. Snyder’s translation of number 22 exemplifies the inextricable connection between nature and spirituality:

On top of Cold Mountain the long round moon
Lights the whole clear cloudless sky.
Honor this priceless natural treasure

⁵ See Richardson, Brenda. The Way to Cold Mountain. “A Journey of Ghosts.” Texas: Houston Fine Art Press, 1992. Pages 28-38.

⁶ RRCM refers to Gary Snyder’s book of poetry, Riprap, & The Cold Mountain Poems. San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1965.

Concealed in five shadows, sunk deep in the flesh. (RRCM 58)

“The long round moon” in the “cloudless sky” inspires a specific visual image, an awe-inspiring “natural treasure” as Snyder calls it. But this full moon, instead of being mysterious and detached, represents something “sunk deep in the flesh.” A full moon in Buddhist art often represents a fully enlightened being that completely contains the five aspects of understanding (“concealed in five shadows”). In one line of this poem, the poet and nature become nondual; they are one in the same, and though neither change physically, the merging alters the poet’s understanding of the world. According to Buddhist philosophy, this consolidation of the phenomenal realm, which is illusive and fleeting reality, with the noumenal realm or absolute reality, alters the practitioner’s cognitive awareness so that he keeps the impermanence of the phenomenal realm in perspective with absolute reality.

And so in this one example, we find a depth of references and meaning captured in just four lines of simple diction. Because we know that Snyder translated these poems as an academic exercise while studying the Chinese language, we see obvious differences in his approach to translation and Eastern culture and Pound’s handling; Snyder’s seems more accurate because he internalizes the original ideals and expresses them in his signature American style. This observation does not lead, however, to a definitive judgment on either translation. T.S. Eliot rightly noted that “each generation must translate for itself” (Hayot 4) according to the space, time, and cultural ideals it represents. And so Snyder translated, not in spite of Pound’s translations but because he laid the foundation for successive generations of interpretation.

Cultural interpretation does not reach its limits within the literary tradition, and writers are not the only artists interested in China. Incorporating Eastern sentiments, real or imagined,

affected and still affects a range of Modernists, among them Brice Marden. John Stomberg, curator of the *Looking East* exhibition at the Boston University Art Gallery early in 2002 writes of Marden as one of three artists who helped create “a fundamentally new art based on translating Asian aesthetics into a Western dialect” (Stomberg 8)⁷. I think it is appropriate to suggest that this “new art” is merely the result of the interpretation trend Pound started. Many aspects of Marden’s art, as we will see, clearly refer to Asian aesthetics, and thus function at least on one level as Stomberg states, transforming “Asian aesthetics into a Western dialect.” But I argue that his Eastern-inspired paintings are not just translations but, like Snyder’s poems, they are *internalizations* of his experiences in Asia and with Asian art.

Marden’s *Cold Mountain* series specifically combines an intuitive, abstract understanding of Han-shan’s poems with his masterful, decidedly American style of layering pigment and scraping it away to create the illusion of light and depth on a flat surface. The result relates indirectly to the poems and then persuades the viewer to make greater connections to nature and humanity. Stomberg strategically defines the final product when he writes that “the transference of culture from one to another inspired art that was completely connected to neither, but had roots in both” (Stomberg 24), a fitting description for both Marden’s and Snyder’s *Cold Mountains*.

⁷ Stomberg, John. *Looking East*. “Re-orienting Modernism: Brice Marden, Michael Mazur, Pat Steir. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002.

In the exhibit and Stomberg’s essay that appears in the exhibit catalogue he discusses Mazur and Steir along with Marden as three artists whose “successful hybridization of East and West witnessed in the work of these three artists has considerably extended the life of modernism by reemphasizing its latent Asian component” (3).

As we consider the value of cross-cultural translation, we find varying degrees of originality, newness, accuracy, and cultural representation, a balance between the author's and translator's respective cultures. We wade through a number of reasons for translating: to inform, to engage, to decode, to understand better someone across an ocean and possibly across centuries. In the process the translator often comes to a new and deeper understanding of himself. Author and translator share an intimate relationship as the latter works to recode the former's language, translating his meaning into a new cultural context. Yu Shiyi, author of a recent article that focuses on the nature of translation, specifically of classical Chinese works into English, says that the translator's role is like an agent rather than a giver, "serving as a linkage between the giver and the receiver of a piece of property owned by somebody else" (Shiyi 92)⁸. Still others say that the translator is an artist himself, caught between an original voice and his own, but in the end creating a stand-alone piece of independent artistic worth. Ulla Roseen describes the translator's role as "a meeting—not between two people...but between two voices, two ways of voicing the experiences and feelings put into the text" (Roseen 251)⁹. The artistry for her comes because "the translator must use her own voice" to revive the text (Roseen 251). Apart from why and how the translator works, I ask a seemingly simpler question: what is the substance of translation? The answer ranges from exact words to feelings to a specific aesthetic to cultural norms to religious ideas to the original author's personal style.

⁸ Shiyi, Yu. "Translation as Participation." *Neohelicon* Vol. 34, Issue 2. Dec 2007. Pages 91–99.

⁹ Roseen, Ulla. "Listening to the Voice of the Author—Translation As a Work of Love." Translation of Poetry and Poetic Prose: Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 110. Allen Sture, Ed. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 1999. Pages 249-253.

Perhaps a translator works toward more than one, but it is accepted that he cannot capture all of the original's elements in his own words. What, then, is the value of translating, and what is gained to compensate for the losses undeniably unavoidable in translation?

In a paper presented at the Nobel Symposium on Translation of Poetry and Poetic Prose in 1998, Mariya Novykova asserts that “it is the untranslatable which is actually worth translating,” some ephemeral aspect of the mixture of language and feeling that must be preserved from the first to second text (Novykova 166)¹⁰. The answer lies somewhere in the study of individual works of translation, through discussion of exactly how and why the original relates to the translation—if the reader can feel the sparks of connection between author and translator—and whether or not the secondary work succeeds as a piece of art on its own. I bring up these numerous complications not because I will discuss and solve them all, but because I want to remind you of the elements that comprise the translation process as I introduce Gary Snyder's translation of the “Cold Mountain” poems.

Timothy Gray advances the notion of “an interstitial contact zone where things are gained, not lost, in translation” as Snyder unlocks the “pure language” defined by theorist Walter Benjamin as the task of the translator (Gray 101). This “pure language” sounds a lot like what Novykova calls the “untranslatable” aspect of language that is the most important part of the translation process. All of these vague terms and definitions amount to saying that translation is difficult, and its success often judged by whether or not some unnamable feeling that exists underneath the words of both languages is communicated. Translating Chinese to English is an especially tricky task “because [Chinese] relies on characters rather than on an alphabet building

¹⁰ Novykova, Mariya. “Double Tongue: Translating Texts or Contexts?” Translation of Poetry and Poetic Prose: Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 110. Allen Sture, Ed. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. 1999. Pages 160-166.

individual words” and “expresses poetic images...often without verbs and with no equivalent of English-language prepositions and articles” (Murphy 18)¹¹. And so for Snyder, accessing the “pure language” of Han-shan’s poems orchestrates the success of his translations. Novykova voices another aspect of compelling translation that reaches beyond communication. She asserts that the translator must create a community between cultures, “having the same meta-semantics and the same spiritual meta-tongue/language” (Novykova 166). With friendly vernacular, spiritual understanding, and an intimate knowledge of mountain terrain, Snyder creates a community of exchange in which Han-shan and Snyder each give a little of their own voice to express a mutually desired lifestyle. The lifestyle exists independently of location as it is situated in neither Han-shan’s China nor Snyder’s California, but more generally in the ideal “interstitial contact zone.”

Riprap Labor

The *Riprap*, & *Cold Mountain Poems* published in 1958 are products of several distinctly life-shaping events for Snyder that culminated in poems containing a “complex interplay between Eastern mind and Western landscape” (Gray 99). During the ‘50s Snyder gained knowledge of Buddhism and integrated himself into a Buddhist community where he was graciously accepted and prompted to study in-depth a variety of Buddhist texts. This knowledge comes through in several of the 24 “Cold Mountain” poems in which he references traditional Buddhist images to emphasize the integration of body and nature, the importance of purging oneself of egoistic desires, the eternal “Buddha-nature,” and journey into the center of self to find peace. To balance his spiritual journey, Snyder spent much of his time in the mountains of

¹¹ Murphy, Patrick D. Understanding Gary Snyder. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991.

California, and in the summer of 1955, he worked in Yosemite National Park, “riprapping” through trails and finding his poetic voice. “Riprap” is a term Snyder invented “under the influence of the geology of the Sierra Nevada and the daily trail-crew work of picking up and placing granite stones in tight cobble patterns on hard slab” (Snyder 420)¹². Snyder’s “adoption of physical labor as a means of spiritual meditation and literary composition” aptly prepared him to identify with Han-shan as a Buddhist poet (Gray 102), as manual labor often accompanies spiritual labor in Buddhism.

Following that summer, Snyder took a Chinese class with Professor Ch’en Shih-hsiang as part of his oriental-language study at UC-Berkeley. Under his instruction, Snyder chose to translate the “Cold Mountain” poems, which Gray says “was the perfect poet for Snyder to study” (Gray 101). Because of Snyder’s intimate relationship with mountainous landscapes and his dedicated spirit, he is connected to Han-shan’s life, though separated by centuries, resulting in the combination of “two mountain sages, from vastly different times and places, speaking clearly and serenely in dialogue across the Pacific Rim” (Gray 101). Reading Snyder’s translations is like witnessing a friendship develop between two kindred spirits who almost missed their chance at connection but, luckily for us readers, were destined to meet at Cold Mountain.

Triplicity of Meaning

Snyder’s translations comprise a collection of 24 short poems, though this number represents a mere fraction of the work left behind by the original author, which apparently was recorded often on the landscape itself: bamboo, rocks, the side of the mountain (Richardson 36). Han-shan, “believed to have been a government official, perhaps even a military general,

¹² Snyder Gary, statement on poetics, in The New American Poetry 1945-1960. Allen, Donald, Ed. University of California Press, 1999.

who left his family and privileged position to retreat to the T'ien-t'ai Mountains," inspired Snyder and his friends, not to abandon their homes and friends, but to pursue life with this same passion and dedication (Gray 137). Han-shan's drastic life change indicates total devotion to living in harmony with nature and his morals. As indicated by Jack Kerouac's dedication of *The Dharma Bums* to Han-shan, this enigmatic character became an honorary Beat writer, someone for Snyder and his contemporaries to identify with and to interpret.

Han-shan's poems are atypical Chinese works in that he usually opts for the vernacular instead of literary poetic diction. "Han Shan was not a poet of the scholar-official circle. In fact, scholars of Tang poetry often exclude his work from their studies by virtue of its eccentricity" (Richardson 29). The poems come across as organic, partly because nature is frequently the focus of attention, but also because they feel easy instead of laboriously heavy-handed, as though a friend is speaking words of wisdom to you over coffee. They are profound without pretense, and they instruct without arrogance. Though the speaker is not shy of telling us that the trail to Cold Mountain is dangerously unmarked and the path must be taken alone, he reassures us of the ultimate benefits of embarking on the trek.

Snyder clarifies in a short preface to his translations that "when [Han-shan] talks about Cold Mountain he means himself, his home, his state of mind" (RRCM 33). This triplicity of meaning establishes three realms or three possible entrances to Cold Mountain: through the man, his home or landscape, and also through his consciously created reality. These three aspects, while balanced and understood separately, also converge until they collapse into one reality, like the phenomenal realm collapsing into the noumenal realm in Buddhist philosophy, implying both a physical, seeable world and a spiritual world underneath it, found mostly when

what is real blends together and collapses into itself to blur the presented image and replace it with a feeling and an aesthetic.

Do You Get It?

Snyder emphasizes the accessible, communal aspect of poetry in his translations so that the meeting is not limited to Han-shan and himself exclusively. His diction choices reflect his personal philosophy and life as a Californian in the 1960s as well as on Han-shan's philosophy evident through his relatable vernacular. Part of the community he creates depends on this colloquial tone used in all of the "Cold Mountain" poems. Snyder uses familiar vocabulary to encapsulate an Eastern, and what would be unfamiliar, point-of-view. Short phrases such as "what's the use" in the second poem and "how do you keep up?" in the first one or "if your heart was like mine / You'd get it and be right here" in the sixth sound like a young person living on the American West Coast telling us what he feels.

The first thing he tells us is that "the path to Han-shan's place is laughable," which opens the series with a peculiar sentiment (RRCM 37, line 1). "Laughable" implies that the trek to Cold Mountain is ridiculous yet amusing, a surprising description of what we might assume to be a serious journey to eternal truth via the path to Enlightenment. The word admits the difficulty of being human on a journey because it acknowledges the craziness of following "a path" with "no sign of cart or horse" (RRCM 37, line 2)¹³. Immediately, we identify with the speaker's humanity

¹³ Compare Snyder's words choice with other translations of the Cold Mountain Poems. Robert Henricks chooses "Delightful! The road to Han-shan" which, like Snyder's "laughable," refuses a serious connotation but does not reference in any way the difficulty or even ridiculousness of pursuing the path to Han-shan, but instead says that the trek is completely delightful and a joy to take. Burton Watson used "wonderful." Stephen Owen says that "it's fun" and Red Pine, closer to Snyder's sentiment, calls the road "strange." Gray points out that all options differ from each other, "but not nearly so much as they collectively differ from Snyder" whose word choice acknowledges

and his determination despite the laughably difficult climb in front of him. His “Body asking shadow, how do you keep up?” reinforces our growing comradeship because the sentiment expressed is one of duality and feeling out-of-body, and we sympathize with Han-shan’s internal disconnect whether or not we have felt a similar severance of mind and body. Still, the speaker must have something to gain from his journey, though not without a loss. He says, with an undertone of sadness, that he has “lost the shortcut home” amidst the “converging gorges” and “jumbled cliffs” (RRCM 37, lines 3, 4) and thereby removes himself from society to become a wanderer through rough terrain. In contrast with the accessible tone, the speaker voluntarily makes himself inaccessible to family and friends. Thus loneliness and the resulting sadness surface in several of the poems, which Gray explains as connected to a “prevalent theme” of “intimate friendship...in Beat circles” as well as “T’ang era writers” (Gray 144). Naturally, then, the speaker feels loss as he leaves society and family behind to “sleep by the creek and purify my ears,” (RRCM 48, line 8) and “sit among these cliffs” while the world around him changes (RRCM 53, line 8).

Retreat from Society

To understand why the speaker has chosen to abandon society, we examine his comments on societal norms and practices, such as the one suggested in the second poem with this rhetorical question: “What’s the use of all that noise and money?” (RRCM 38, line 8). We begin to understand that he wants to experience profoundly lasting truth and to escape fleeting materialism. The “noise” he mentions refers to the collective sound of society at work and

“Han-shan’s route to higher knowledge” to be “as ridiculous as it is sublime” (Gray 142-143) in addition to my claim that “laughable” emphasizes the speaker’s humanness in contrast with nature’s looming and difficult terrain.

carries a negative connotation, which leaves us to assume that, in the speaker's opinion, quietness is undervalued. We infer that society's distractions impeded the speaker from pursuing the austere lifestyle he desires. In poem fifteen, the speaker describes himself as a "naked bug" who "means to cut down senseless craving," which suggests that egoistic desire is inherently present in living individuals and must be controlled. Thus, the speaker advocates the most important piece of Buddhist philosophy: to purge oneself of natural, selfish desire. He endorses this lifestyle throughout the series but never belabors the subject. Instead, he gently reinforces it with low-key diction so as not to approach the noisy level of society and disturb the spiritual process. The speaker seems to depend on the natural surroundings for his spiritual enlightenment, and communicating in any other way besides short, mild statements would upset the equilibrium of nature and man. In an especially poignant and balanced moment, as "the rising sun blurs in swirling fog," the speaker tells us readers the secret to his success: "My heart's not the same as yours. / If your heart was like mine / You'd get it and be right here" (RRCM 42 lines 6-8). "Get it," colloquial and unpretentious, balances this sentiment that otherwise could express spiritual superiority and feel demeaning.

Again, the speaker separates himself from everyone else, using the "you" pronoun to refer to the collective reader. At the beginning of this poem, he refers to "men" who "ask the way to Cold Mountain" and switches to "you" when giving his response. This shift from impersonal to personal indicates a fundamental difference between the inquiring men and the speaker. The former exists as a mass, a large group without distinct individuals who are unable to find Cold Mountain because they will not boldly separate themselves from the group, nor will they take the time to introspectively examine their hearts long enough to realize that the secret of "the way" cannot be explained by someone else, but exists already within them. The speaker,

on the other hand, knows the way and speaks directly to “you” the individual with a heart to redirect attention to the internal source of truth and away from external questioning. This direct communication, though it’s used to acknowledge a difference between the speaker and the reader, nonetheless contributes to the community-building process. His approach is intimate and modest, though confident, as if offering advice to a friend in whispered wisdom, like the overall tone of the series.

Not every reference to the outside “men” is accompanied by self-assured defense of the speaker’s lifestyle. In the tenth poem of the series, the speaker, in a rare moment, acknowledges a specific amount of time that has passed, “I have lived at Cold Mountain / These thirty long years” (RRCM 46, lines 1-2), implying concern for the passing years and the things he has missed as well as admitting his loneliness because the years are “long.” When he expresses sadness over being separated from his relatives, we find further evidence of these concerns: “Yesterday I called on friends and family” and is confronted with their mortality when he finds that “more than half had gone to the Yellow Springs” (lines 3, 4), referring to death. This confrontation with time and its consequences forces the speaker to think about his own death and “suddenly my eyes are bleared with tears” (line 8), not only for his deceased relatives but for his inevitable decay. This direct image of sudden emotion indicates the speaker’s humanity just as describing the journey as “laughable” does, only this time the tone is strikingly different, melancholic instead of light-hearted. His “lone shadow” still accompanies him and it is the confrontation with the image of aloneness that spurs his emotion. Interestingly, though, the speaker experiences sadness as something that initiates itself in a sudden onslaught of tears. Instead of using an active verb like “to cry,” or even a phrase like “I feel,” the speaker’s “eyes are bleared with tears,” which places the speaker in a passive role. “I” rarely appears in these

poems, indicating the speaker's oneness with his surroundings, but its absence also eliminates the need for active verbs. Rather, his emotions are states not necessarily separate from the action.

Ernest Fenollosa, who studied Asian languages in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, points out this aspect of the Chinese language, where “thing and action are not formally separated” by “to be” verbs, which make “existence a state rather than an action” (Hayot 30). Part of the success of Snyder's translations rests on his sensitivity to this difference between Chinese and English. To keep thing and action closely related, Snyder presents both the speaker and the landscape as suspended in a perpetual present, so that the action itself becomes a state. Observations like “The cherry flowers out scarlet / The willow shoots up feathery” (RRCM 49, lines 3-4) in Poem 13 deliberately lack an indication of time. Instead of “is flowering,” the “cherry flowers,” and includes no adverb like “now,” “yesterday,” or “monthly” to specify the occurrence. The actions are suspended and seemingly constant, much as the poems seem to exist independently of time with only one reference in all 24 of them to the 30 years that have passed at Cold Mountain.

It's as if the constant state of Cold Mountain is affected differently by the space-time continuum, outside of history while somehow encompassing it. Snyder explains this idea in an interview: “That which is in history, is in history. And you can't shortcut history. It's going to have to work itself out. Maybe individuals can kind of leap out of time in their own lives, in their own lifestyles. But the whole social and cultural process is going to have to work itself out infinitely slower” (Writers Uncensored)¹⁴. Han-shan is one of those individuals who has leapt

¹⁴ Writers Uncensored - Gary Snyder: If Trees Could Talk. Prod. Lewis MacAdams and John Dorr. The Lannon Foundation. 1991. Accessed on The Internet Archive, public domain.
< http://www.archive.org/details/ddtv_63_gary_snyder>.

out of time with his lifestyle, out of the history typically recorded in and around societies. And he “gets it,” though his individual revelation achieved in a lifetime must unfold much more slowly, over many lifetimes to be realized on a cultural scale.

Language of the Land

Snyder’s work in California’s mountains and childhood in Washington suitably prepared him to describe Han-shan’s landscape with an authority unlike other “Cold Mountain” translators, and his hiker’s stride frequently surfaces in the poetry’s rhythm¹⁵. In an early 2009 reading of a selection of these poems, Snyder himself emphasizes the “riprapping” of mountain walking with a jerky lilt in his voice when he reads poem 8¹⁶.

Clambering up the Cold Mountain path,
The Cold Mountain trail goes on and on:
The long gorge choked with scree and boulders,
The wide creek, the mist-blurred grass.
The moss is slippery, though there’s been no rain.
The pine sings, though there’s no wind.
Who can leap the world’s ties
And sit with me among the white clouds? (RRCM 44)

He pauses at the end of every line regardless of punctuation or the lack of it, and often alters emphasis by using obvious tonal adjustments in his voice, similar to the aural tones in Chinese. I have bolded sections of the poem that receive specific syllabic weight, and to represent the downward or upward changes in tonality, words in each line are lowered or raised accordingly.

¹⁵ Gray explains Snyder’s authority: “None of the other translators, with the possible exception of Red Pine, speaks so forcefully about the harsh nature of Han-shan’s habitat, probably because none of them could lay claim to any extended residence in a Pacific Rim mountain range” (Gray 146).

¹⁶ Snyder, Gary. Past Exhibitions. “The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989.” The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2009. Recording accessed online: <<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/2716/3>>.

In one instance, Snyder extends a final consonant sound, and I noted the extension parenthetically.

Clambering up the Cold Mountain path,
 The trail on and on:
 The Cold Mountain goes
 The long gorge choked with scree and boulders,
 The wide creek, the mist-blurred grass.
 The moss(sssss) is slippery, though there's been no rain
 The wind.
 The pine sings, but there's no
 Who
 can leap the world's ties
 white clouds?
 And sit with me among the

Snyder carefully constructs an aural space with its own rugged trails and steep, narrow passages. Every lurch in Snyder's voice feels as if the speaker's heavy feet have hit the ground with one more step, one foot in front of the other. At the end of the final line, on "white clouds?" he adds a breathy emphasis not used elsewhere and speeds up the phrase slightly to illustrate verbally the speaker's removed position in the clouds. The rhythm is a prime example of Snyder's poetic structuring of language to reflect the physical world. He fuses the language to the landscape to the body, which functions similarly to the triplicity of meaning implied in Cold Mountain: a place, a man, and a mindset. Snyder says that "language is a mind-body system that coevolved with our needs and nerves,"¹⁷ meaning that it has evolved with human psychology,

¹⁷ Snyder, Gary. A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds. Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995. Page 189.

which is inherently connected to our mind and body. In this specific case, the fusion includes two bodies: Han-shan's primary experience in the T'ien-t'ai and Snyder's individual pace along California's terrain, both of which are shaped by and dependent on the land. Because the speaker is a combination of Han-shan's mindset and Snyder's knowledge of the American west coast, the poem represents a broader union between East and West.

When Snyder reads his poems, he verbally constructs a space that does not exist anywhere else because it cannot possibly be real, except through translated poetry. The described Cold Mountain path is not completely reflective of Han-shan's T'ien t'ai habitat or Snyder's California trails, though the translation references both. In Buddhist art and poetry, a path may be visually represented or descriptively defined to suggest a spiritual metaphor and state-of-mind. For the Buddhist practitioner, the path exists in his own heart-mind, not dependent at all on a physical journey. So the translations function like a Buddhist mandala, which is a realistic visual representation of meditations designed to aid the practitioner in internalizing and participating in meditations himself. Snyder's verbalizing his poems is like the practitioner visualizing a meditation; both are removed from physical reality and focused on a spiritual reality.

Gray explains how Snyder's specific word choices describe the Cascade Mountains and Sierra Nevadas as opposed to Han-shan's T'ien-t'ai Mountain Range. After a series of trials Snyder lands on "scree and boulders" to describe the "long gorge" in Poem 8, line three, "the image he thought most accurately represented the Sierra Nevada landscape" instead of the most literal translation of Han-shan's manuscript (Gray 147). So successful translation, then, does not necessarily depend on direct renderings of the original text as much as it depends on the translator's understanding of the author's intended meaning. Of course, we can never know for

sure what Han-shan's intention was, but Snyder attempts to understand it from the only perspective he knows: his own. And the result is some sense of Benjamin's "pure language" mentioned earlier that fills the poetic East-West space with a contemplative mood affected by keen observances of the natural surroundings.

Visualizing Cold Mountain

Snyder's translations carry strong visual elements that give his English an Eastern dimension, and leave the reader with 24 mental snapshots of Cold Mountain. Written Chinese relies heavily on visual elements because it communicates ideas through "blocks and concise phrases" to build "poetic images" (Murphy 18). One Chinese character is equivalent to one word or idea, not to one component sound, as in English. And so written Chinese presents a series of words and ideas without the syntactical structure in Indo-European languages. Chinese poetry behaves this way even more than its prose, a sequence of "word pictures" that challenge the translator to "supply just enough syntax to connect the characters" (Gray 142). "A typical Han-shan poem consists of eight lines, each of which contains five Chinese characters" and each line, if literally translated to English, would often read as a series of nouns (Gray 142). When read in the original Chinese, the ideogram, in addition to communicating a thing, also communicates a visual image to emphasize the meaning. As a result, the reader has some sort of hybrid artistic experience that is both verbal and visual. Because this aspect of the Chinese language is not readily translated, Snyder had to approach his task creatively, taking "several painstaking steps, each of which had him reflecting upon familiar mind pictures" (Gray 147). Snyder cites this ability as the ultimate success of his translations:

I was able to do fresh, accurate translations of Han-shan because I was able to envision Han-shan's world, because I had so much experience in the mountains and there are many images in Han-shan which are directly images of mountain scenery and mountain terrain and mountain weather that if a person had not felt those himself physically he would not be able to get the same feel into the translation—it would be more abstract. I think that was the success of the translations—a meeting of sensations.¹⁸

But even more than firsthand experience in the mountains constitutes Snyder's sensitivity to Han-shan and his musings. The especially qualifying characteristic Snyder possessed was something more intangible and relates to an intrinsic connection to nature and a deep desire to learn from it, the way other people learn from pedagogues. In "The *East West* Interview" with Peter Barry Chowka in 1977 Snyder describes his fascination with the natural world:

When I was young, I had an immediate, intuitive, deep sympathy with the natural world which was not taught me by anyone. In that sense, nature is my "guru" and life is my sadhana. That sense of the authenticity, completeness, and reality of the natural world itself made me aware even as a child of the contradictions that I could see going on around me in the state of Washington. (Interviews 92)¹⁹

The idea that life in its entirety is Snyder's "sadhana" infuses spirituality into everything. "Sadhana" typically describes a sort of spiritual practice undertaken to meet a goal and acquire understanding. For Snyder, life is a spiritual process, and he finds the clearest, wisest advice on how to live from nature. Calling nature his "guru" elevates it to a spiritually advanced status and implies that the natural world contains truths that humans inherently lack. It makes sense, then,

¹⁸ Quoted in Lee Bartlett's "Gary Snyder's Han-Shan," *Sagetrieb* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1983): page 107.

¹⁹ Snyder, Gary. *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks, 1964-1979*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1980.

that Snyder's work often presents a certain type of person as deeply connected to—or even a part of—nature. More than grammatical differences and the visual aspect, “what Snyder says he admires most in Chinese poetry is its recognition of habitat. Tellingly, it is habitat's relationship to natural domesticity, or what Snyder calls the ‘capacity to live,’ that suffuses his version of the ‘Cold Mountain Poems’” (Gray 140-41).

Elsewhere in the “*East West Interview*” Snyder continues to describe the seeds of interest within himself that would bloom into his life's interests and work. “At that age I had no idea of European culture or of politics. The realities were my mind, my self, and my place. My sympathies were entirely with my place....As early as I was allowed, at age nine or ten, I went off and slept in the woods at night alone” (Interviews 93). “My mind, my self, and my place” is the same triplet implied by the mountain mystic whose actual name is unidentified. His pen-name, Han-shan, encompasses all three aspects, these same three elements that Snyder discovered to be foundational in forming his identity. The mind implies a consciousness and way of life that Snyder finds inseparable from nature. In a video interview Snyder relates the mind easily to the natural world when he says that poets “speak on behalf of the elegance, the orderliness, and the freedom of the mind, which is to say of the natural world.” For him, the mind reflects the capabilities and behaviors of the natural world because neither of them run “on clock work.” Nature is “more like the imagination...it moves in an extraordinarily harmonious but relentless way. And yet it is not ultimately predictable. And so there's something that carries over to the mind from that. But what is the mind but part of that? Our own inner processes can be nothing but part of that” (Writers Uncensored).

Chinese visual art reflects the relationship between human consciousness and nature in a way that young Snyder identified with and found extraordinarily appealing. He describes an

instance when he was about eleven or twelve years old and saw Chinese landscape paintings at the Seattle art museum. “They blew my mind,” he says, partly because he recognized the Cascades, “the waterfalls, the pines, the clouds” in China’s topography, and partly because “the Chinese had an eye for the world that I saw as real” (Interviews 94). This moment of quiet realization and identification with Chinese culture remained with him, and so meeting Han-shan at Cold Mountain seems fated, a poignant spiritual encounter in Snyder’s sandhana. With his experience living in the Pacific Rim and his self-defined receptivity to the natural world and an inbred awareness of what is typically characterized as “Eastern thought,” Snyder seems to be more equipped to have a more genuine “Chinese” experience while working on his poems than the reader has while reading them. The success of the reader’s experience hinges on Snyder’s ability to draw the reader into his own visualizations with careful combinations of compound images, hoping to affect English readers like the stack of images given to Snyder in the originals.

Let’s examine the first poem in Snyder’s set for visual impact:

The path to Han-shan’s place is laughable
 A path, but no sign of cart or horse.
 Converging gorges—hard to trace their twists
 Jumbled cliffs—unbelievably rugged.
 A thousand grasses bend with dew,
 A hill of pines hums in the wind.
 And now I’ve lost the shortcut home
 Body asking shadow, how do you keep up? (RRCM 37)

Snyder describes the first image here, “a path,” with a negative visual description: “no sign of cart or horse.” Instead of illustrating what *is* present, an infrequently traveled trail, Snyder tells us what is not present. Next is a series of strong visuals: “converging gorges,” “jumbled cliffs,” “a thousand grasses bend,” and “a hill of pines.” Snyder gives the reader copious visual information, which computes similarly to the visual information absorbed standing in front of a large painting in a museum. Of course, the poetry includes other sensory information such as

“hums in the wind,” but the general effect is to make the landscape as real as possible for the reader. Note the final two lines in which the poem moves from concrete descriptions of the land to introspective reflections, indicative of the close connection between nature and abstract, spiritual matters.

Poem 7 illustrates with visual adjectives the relationship between man and nature, and their removed, timeless existence.

I settled at Cold Mountain long ago,
Already it seems like years and years.
Freely drifting, I prowl the woods and streams
And linger watching things themselves.
Men don't get this far into the mountains
White clouds gather and billow.
Thin grass does for a mattress,
The blue sky makes a good quilt.
Happy with a stone overhead
Let heaven and earth go about their changes. (RRCM 43)

Lines 6-9 describe nature as a bed where the speaker happily rests while the world changes around him. “White clouds,” “thin grass,” and “blue sky” contribute to the poem’s visual impact. But more than these descriptions, this poem prompts visualizations because the speaker himself says that he “linger[s] watching things” in line 4. So the act of watching, the observer’s role, is an important aspect of the speakers’ journey. Linger suggests slowness and observing “things themselves” implies an admiration and respect for those things. The time required to absorb one’s surroundings in this manner is not available in the work-oriented, fast-paced society that the speaker abandoned. So visualizing to absorb the subject is an indication of non-traditional priorities; the speaker soaks in the moment.

This idea of the moment applies to experiencing visual art like a painting or photograph because these objects allow the viewer to explore the captured moment for an extended period of time. A moment represented visually grabs it out of time and lets the audience take in every

detail of the scene instead of pass through it. So the absence of time description in poem 13, when the “willow shoots up feathery,” is like the absence of time in a painting; the physical hanging, the canvas for example, passes through time, but the scene depicted on it stays the same.

Another poem, number 11, functions similarly to the previously discussed poems with visual adjectives, but also contains an additional element that links it to visual art.

Spring-water in the green creek is clear
Moonlight in Cold Mountain is white
Silent knowledge—the spirit is enlightened of itself
Contemplate the void: this world exceeds stillness. (RRCM 47)

The first half of this short poem presents two simple images, though their visual impact is undeniable. Snyder uses the colors green and white and clear accompanied by short states-of-being to create again the sense of an eternal moment. “Is clear” and “is white” suggest that the states they denote do not depend on nor are they affected by time, but, as the last two lines tell us, their visualization and endless existence inspire philosophizing and instill knowledge, the kind of knowledge Snyder refers to in the “*East West Interview*” that one learns from a natural guru, which in this case is the creek, moonlight, and mountain. “The spirit is enlightened of itself” refers to a state of heightened awareness in which the practitioner achieves an understanding of the spiritual realm in himself, in perspective with the reality around him. Snyder describes the process as “silent,” the most appropriate adjective, because the knowledge comes not from a verbalization but from inspired introspection.

In fact, a visual representation instead of a verbal one might more effectively awaken the audience to a spiritual realization that occurs internally and is spurred by the quiet stillness of the surroundings. Perhaps no other art form besides the visual variety can lay claim to silence. Poetry comes second, often best read aloud though certainly read silently. Snyder’s poems,

which present sequences of images in written form, are a partly verbal and partly visual experience; they combine both art forms: language first, visual art second. Part of the success of his translations comes from this close relationship, which is inherently present in written Chinese, where each character presents a visual image to accompany the literary impact. For a directly visual perspective, we'll explore Brice Marden's expression of Han-shan's Cold Mountain.

Brice Marden: Heart & Mind

Brice Marden, American painter, believes that the artist has a special responsibility to produce works that transcend prettiness and arrive at (or at least suggest) meaning. He takes his role seriously as someone “living in the culture, making pieces about the culture,” permanent perceptions of the time. Successful pieces with permanence and depth require the artist to be willing to change. “To maintain any kind of life as an artist is to make change,” Marden says. He consistently challenges himself, and the evidence of vigorous thought and self-criticism threads throughout his work in both subtle and obvious ways. He practices constant transformation as an individual and as a painter while seeing the act of painting as a transformation, too:

It's like air and dross. A painting, you know, it's all dirty material. But it's about transformation. Taking that earth, that heavy earthen kind of thing, turning it into air and light. The transformation, you know, that's what it's about. Working on these paintings there's always an idea which is an ideal. It's always impossible...But I think every time, maybe, I just get closer to some impossible thing... (Interview with Pat Steir)²⁰

This quote is taken from a 1991 interview with Marden specifically addressing the *Cold Mountain* series, a total of six large paintings loosely inspired by Han-shan's poems, but it applies to the artist's general process also. He aspires each time he creates a new piece to improve upon his last, always ascending the ladder of personal perfection each time getting “closer to some impossible thing.”

²⁰ “Brice Marden / *Cold Mountain* / An Interview with Brice Marden by Pat Steir.” Adapted by Lynne Cooke from the interview in Brice Marden Recent Drawings and Etchings. New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1991. No pagination online.
<<http://www.diaart.org/exhibs/marden/coldmountain/interview.html>>.

Perhaps the most obvious transformation within Marden's work is manifested by a dynamic shift in his body of work: from minimalist, monochromatic studies to abstract, energetic gesture paintings of line and subtle color, though the change is not quite as dichotomous as that definition might suggest. Included in the gestural line group is Marden's *Cold Mountain* series in which each rectangular piece of linen contains intertwining lines based on a grid pattern of eight columns divided into four sets of two, which the painter says "comes out of the structure of Han Shan's poems, the actual couplets" (Black Marden Book, pg. 52). But before analyzing these specific paintings, let's examine Marden's artistic foundation and his role as American Modernist in order to contextualize the *Cold Mountain* series in the arch of his work.

More Meaning Than Wallpaper

As a student at Yale in the early 1960s, Marden developed in an atmosphere where Abstract Expressionism was still a guiding artistic force even though some reactions to it had already been successfully developed²¹. Marden was part of the modernist movement whose goals are articulated in Clement Greenberg's 1960 "Modernist Painting" essay, which states that art aims to portray "that which was unique and irreducible" within each individual medium (Greenberg 112)²². So the painter's job is to emphasize the material qualities of his art: the canvas, the stretcher board, the paint, but also to critique what Greenberg defines as its

²¹ Kertess, Klaus. "Plane Image / The Painting and Drawing of Brice Marden." *Brice Marden Paintings and Drawings*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992.

See page 11-12: "Abstract Expressionism was still casting a long shadow across the early Sixties, in spite of the seminal reactions against its tenets already achieved by Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol. Following the lead of the precocious Stella, many of Marden's fellow students were looking to and secularizing the cooler side of Abstract Expressionism's striving for the sublime, as practiced by Barnett Newman, as well as absorbing Ad Reinhardt's glacially radicalized reductionism."

²² Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." Essay located in *The Philosophy of Art Readings Ancient and Modern*. Ed: Neill, Alex and Ridley, Aaron. Boston: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. 1995.

distinctive feature, “ineluctable flatness” (Greenberg 112). Of course all paintings are flat, but the difference for modernists is that “one is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains” (Greenberg 112). Marden, working from Abstract Expressionism into the Minimalism of the late 60s and 70s, embraced painting’s flatness and rectangles and explored ambiguity but still desired his work to be “literally and figuratively felt” (Kertess 12) instead of completely isolated and self-referential. A healthy dose of subjectivity was Marden’s solution to the progressive painter’s dilemma. Progressive American art at this time completely rejected literal pictures and wholeheartedly embraced the painter’s process and materials but still required that the final product be more meaningful than empty wallpaper design.

Marden challenges Modernism from the very beginning of his career. His early works hint at subjectivity, which seems to oppose modernism’s goal of approaching an objective and pure medium to allow for self-criticism²³. In “An Interview with Brice Marden” from 2003, the artist discusses the history and details of his work with John Yau²⁴. Yau observes that Marden sometimes combines grids, which are “objective in [their] measuring” with drawing, which is subjective in its mark-making (Yau 46). He describes the same tension in Marden’s paintings, in which the abstractions “may allude to specific individual, human proportions, while the color and...use of wax are evocative” (Yau 46). Since the 1960s, Marden’s work has resisted classification. When “the goal of abstraction was [to stand] apart from the world as well as

²³ Greenberg in “Modernist Painting” writes, “the task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered “pure,” and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.”

²⁴ Yau is an Asian American poet and art critique who currently teaching Art Criticism at Rutgers University. His double role allows him to speak easily with Marden regarding the relationship between poetry and visual art, as well as inspirations rooted in Asia.

ma[k]e no reference to it,” Marden added “subjectivity, a personal aspect.” While he was very much influenced by the mode of self-criticism and material exploration, Marden never abandoned his intuitive sensibility to realize fully the pure and objective goal of abstract expressionism.

Marden became attached to gray for its ambiguity and mystery early in his career because its undefined qualities contained or had the potential to contain aspects of the metaphysical. “His paintings then, as now, were attempts to overcome the factual” (Stomberg 39). In conjunction with the transmission of intangible and intuitive ideas, Marden often highlights the painting’s physicality by leaving a skinny strip of unpainted canvas on the bottom edge of his earlier paintings. He lets the vestigial paint drips mark it as they would, evidence of procedure and method and also the hint of “illusion—a subversion of total objectness” (Kertess 11). The color itself carries its own set of uncertainties and to give gray a shape, rectangular and solitary, is to amplify its unknowns. Through an attempt to contain the enigmatic shade within four edges, the artist emphasizes that its meaning cannot be defined as easily as the space it is in. “Gray is not black, gray is not white, gray is not pure color, gray is not pure light. A panoply of grays reigned over Marden’s palette from his student days through the early Seventies—gray as color, gray as light, deceptively simple, constantly changing” (Kertess 12). Constantly changing, like the life Marden’s paintings imply and into which they eventually grow.

New Surface

After a trip to Paris, Marden’s interest in the plane and surface grew more intense, and he experimented with thicker substances until settling on a combination of beeswax and oil paints

to affect the quality of the canvas's surface²⁵. So in addition to a color impact, the works have a physical presence that implies depth, though the depth is contained. The painting can only be as thick as the materials allow, can extend only as far as the canvas edges. The viewer figuratively feels the texture, fulfilling Marden's own requirement of producing pieces with meaning and life capable of affecting the viewer. The canvas surface is suffused with organic tones from the wax and texture that seem to have risen and spread autonomously, their dependency on Marden's hand signaled only by the sliver of white canvas at the bottom of the painting. Instead of an image, Marden creates a presence, an aesthetic force of color and subtle modulations that affirms the purity of painting and relates intuitively to the real inspirations behind each work, alluded to in their titles.

The result of merging gray's ambiguity and the oil-based wax mixture was first shown in a New York exhibition in the fall of 1966. The exhibit including paintings like *Nebraska*, *Dylan Painting*, and the *Nico Painting* which use variations of gray, a different shade for each one. But also within each painting what at first appears to be flat color actually contains understated variations of the hue, revealed by the wax mixture that absorbs and holds the light, at once illuminating and concealing the color. The particular shades and fluctuations allude to a memory or feeling specific to their title's subject and to Marden's relationship with the subject. Klaus Kertess, a respected art curator, writes of the *Dylan Painting* for example: "The rasping mauve-gray, at once cool and vulnerable, exudes a kind of tough loneliness and a soulfulness tinged

²⁵ According to Klaus Kertess, the beeswax and oil mixture came from a suggestion from another painter, Harvey Quaytman. Marden "combined the oil paint with beeswax and turpentine to create a smooth, dense, and malleable medium. Unlike the harder and more transparent medium of uncausitc, which is bound by wax, Marden's mixture was bound by oil. He kept his new medium warm on a hot plate, and he constantly mixed and slowly blended it on the refrigerator door that served as his palette. He worked the paint with a large painting spatula and a small painting knife. This was the medium he would employ until 1981." The first painting with wax, *Wax I* was done in 1966.

with the absurd that parallels the funky clichés of Dylan’s sung-and-spoken poetry” (Kertess 16). The gray of this painting or of the *Nebraska* painting does not aim to translate a personality or a landscape, but instead “to retrieve and make concrete the memory of the experience” (Kertess 16).

Mark as Meditation

The subjectivity of Marden’s art shines through in the experiences it alludes to and makes the body of work distinct from Minimalism’s paradigm that includes “a purely secular, often mechanical, neutrality and impersonality” (Kertess 18). His monochrome diptychs and triptychs employ rather than deny the fundamental subjectivity of marking; thus Marden builds his own set of rules rooted in his personality “while others tended to follow a preordained logic” (Kertess 18-19). The mark became an increasingly powerful influence in Marden’s work, and throughout the Seventies, his drawings leaned toward experimental and explicit mark-making while his paintings explored variations on plane division and broader color investigations, opening his gray palette to primary hues. Also during this time, Marden opened his work to address more universal experiences; “his colors were enjoined to evoke realms of broader, less immediately personal meanings” (Kertess 27). He moves elegantly into spiritual realms, probing the painter’s process and paint’s qualities for light and spirit to achieve an ambitious and grander fusion of material and immaterial substance than was realized in his earliest works. For example, the *Annunciation* paintings, a group of five pieces that symbolize the five stages of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, directly address the “ideal metaphor for the acts of art” that Marden found in “the concepts of light as spirit and the incarnation of the spiritual in the physical that are at the core of the Christian metaphor of the Annunciation” (Kertess 29).

Marden's interest in historical context and spirituality continues, exemplified in *Thira*, which translated from Greek means "door" (see *Figure 1*). The 96" x 180" painting consists of three equal divisions to create three rectangles that function as separate panels. The left and right panels are divided further into seven rectangles with the same width and varying lengths. In the left panel the two side rectangles are a muted sea green like the top rectangle (together they form an upside-down "U" on the panel's perimeter), the center rectangle is a shade of orange as is the bar parallel and on top of it, creating a "T" shape inside of the upside down "U," and the remaining two rectangles on either side of the T's center rectangle are the same color, a deep shade of cool violet-gray. On the right panel, the "U" is vibrant red, the "T" is blue-gray, and the two inside rectangles are medium gray-brown. With three colors, Marden creates figure and ground options, back-and-forth between the "U" and T." The middle panel houses four rectangles of different colors. The red-orange horizontal rectangle at the top of the canvas is even with the top rectangles on the other panels, but instead of two rectangles of the same width and color to form the vertical legs of the "U" shape, the width is doubled for the rectangles on the left and right sides of the canvas. The left shape is red, the right shape is blue-green, and in between them is a blue rectangle of the majority's width. Kertess explains that the "post-and-lintel formations and the 'Romanized' color relate directly to Marden's dialogue with Roman painting" (Kertess 30). The "T" shapes simultaneously suggest the first letter of "Theo," Greek for "God," and the New Testament trio of crosses at Golgatha. Thus with *Thira*, Marden positions "himself into the history of culture" as the "vertical planes of landscape color become architecture become language become symbol become shifting painted space, and back again to the beginning" (Kertess 30-31).

Thira was one of Marden's last large-scale paintings before he traded the wax and oil medium he had used for 15 years for a thinner oil medium that, unlike the previous amalgamation, dries flat and is more sensitive to the artist's hand, provoking more exact exchange of Marden's intuitive marks and paint's objective limitations. In an interview Marden expressed the necessity of closeness when he's working: "the less you have between you and what you're making the better," (Interview with Pat Steir²⁶) and this thinner medium allows the artist to be more specific in his control, closer to the paint and how it functions on the canvas. His long-time interest in the plane and its boundaries had led him to his techniques as he further investigates the painter's space. Lines crept into his paintings where they had previously been limited to his drawings. Marden began to let his usual opacity wane to transparency so that the colors seem to float on and across the surface instead of rooting firmly in it. A series of window studies done as stained glass proposals for the Basel Cathedral reflect the beginning of Marden's new direction. The commission never was realized, but the studies still represent part of Marden's maturation. The small paintings feature multiple colors and straight lines running across the surface, intersecting over and under, reflecting light in transparent ebbs from the criss-crossing marks. The overall effect evokes sunlight through stained glass and builds a foundation for the *Cold Mountain* paintings Marden would begin in 1985.

Synthesis in Calligraphy

Brenda Richardson, who wrote the text of the monograph that accompanies the exhibition "Brice Marden – Cold Mountain," cites the "explicit spiritual issues" involved in

²⁶ Interview adapted by Lynne Cooke from the interview in Brice Marden Recent Drawings and Etchings. New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1991. Accessed online. No paginations. < <http://www.diaart.org/exhibs/marden/coldmountain/interview.html>>.

designing stained glass destined for a cathedral as the greatest contribution to the *Cold Mountain* pieces from the window studies.

Cathedral windows tell stories to the faithful, whether communicated in narrative subjects or more abstractly through the intuitive forms impelled by the artist's convictions. Intuitive transmission from master to pupil is the fundamental medium of Buddhist teaching, and as with calligraphy, it is intuitive transmission that comprises the "language of abstract art." (Richardson 50)

Calligraphy is regarded as a fine art in Chinese culture, of a stature comparable to painting and poetry. Moreover, "there is not greater or lesser value in Chinese art among landscape, figuration, and calligraphy as suitable subjects for a picture" (Richardson 49). The "intuitive transmission" Richardson finds in calligraphy relates to the tension between intuitive or subjective marks and objective form. Calligraphy combines the individual's preference of stroke and design of each character, their compositional effect in the whole work with the art form's tradition and, of course, the meaning of the words that are solidly defined, though "the choice of the text to be written is of decidedly secondary importance" (Richardson 26). The artistic differences and choices—the personality—of calligraphy is striking, and perfectly complementary to Marden, as his personality was already a distinctive feature in his art during Minimalism, when personality suppression and pursuit of the most objectively-produced piece of art were desirable. Increasingly, his personality manifested as spiritual investigations typified in the previously discussed *Thiru* and the window studies. It certainly seems as though Marden was destined to encounter Asian calligraphy on his path to create the perfect synthesis of intuition, objectivity, spiritual matters, and painting's conventions. And it is in on this path that he will encounter Han Shan.

The 1984 "Masters of Japanese Calligraphy" exhibition in New York affirmed Marden's conquest of "writerly drawing and painting," and from there "Marden moved to its source,

Chinese calligraphy” (Kertess 41). Marden had begun drawing inspiration from seashells after a stay in Thailand, and his “increasing urge to liberate organic mark-making” fits well, as we will see, with early influences on calligraphy. He produced sketches and drawings based on patterns in found shells and tree bark and leaves, not literal tracings of these natural phenomena but inspired marks, sometimes connected to form lines but not always. In *Shell Drawing #2*, the marks are arranged in an intuitive, unmarked grid, all varied slightly in shape and size like bits of chromosomes in a karyotype, in which chromosome pairs are ordered and numbered, their varied shapes and sizes especially striking when placed side-by-side. Marden refers to this drawing and similar ones as portraits of the subject; the etched lines and ink drips refer to the natural marks on the shell as well as external environmental effects²⁷.

According to myth, Chinese rulers in the third millennium B.C. “based their first efforts at writing on the patterns of natural phenomena” and even as the written language developed and grew in complexity, “it retained the mesh of the traces of the kinesthetic movements of the hand with the patterns of the forces of nature” (Kertess 41). So Marden’s intimate studies of abstract influence of natural occurrences are perfectly adapted to transition into studying organic traces in calligraphy. In addition to appreciating and studying calligraphy as gestural mark-making and visual art, Marden turned to poetry to understand better the literary aspect of calligraphy while also acquiring a deeper sense of Chinese culture and its “mindset.” He first focused on Ezra Pound’s translations of Li Po and Kenneth Rexroth’s translations of Tu Fu²⁸.

²⁷ See page 44 of *Looking East / Brice Marden Michael Mazur Pat Steir* in which John Stomberg discusses the influence of organic shapes and lines on Marden’s work.

²⁸ See page 51 of Richardson’s text. Also note that in 1985, Marden worked in *Etchings to Rexroth*, a series of prints inspired by Rexroth’s Tu Fu translations similar to the way Han Shan translations inspired the *Cold Mountains*. The *Rexroth* set studies calligraphy and translation, but Marden had yet to explore fully the relationship between visual and written art. While the sketches clearly lean

Later he received Red Pine's translations of the Cold Mountain poems in an edition that featured the English and Chinese poems side-by-side. As Marden viewed the Chinese characters while reading in English, he "connected the visual form of the characters with the spiritual and emotional content of the language" (Richardson 51): the igniting spark of the Cold Mountain project that would occupy him for several years.

Grander Scale

In the late 1980s, Marden reinstated the large canvas, this time bigger than ever. His oil and wax paintings often were determined according to human heights, but Marden desired to depart from human references and move to natural realms and grander expanses. *Cold Mountain I (Path)*, the first painting in the series, is a nine-by-twelve single canvas that Marden approached as a new challenge. Large paintings, Marden felt, almost always reached a degree of mechanicalness that he found harsh and unfeeling, perhaps because their size seems looming and assertive. The challenge came in avoiding the cold automaticity of large-scale painting and using the size to project fluidity and travel, to feel humanity in the painting²⁹. Marden naturally approaches small paintings (both his own and other artists') with ready honesty and willing vulnerability. He talks about Pollock's "smaller ones as really pulling you in" whereas the large works are more removed from the viewer. "It's almost the difference between being told a story and being a character in a story," Marden says (Richardson 44). He had been making multipanel

toward the *Cold Mountain* paintings, they do not have the grace and insight—the light—of the *Cold Mountain* series.

²⁹ See pages 54-54 of Brenda Richardson's text. "On one level, then, Marden's decision to work at expanded size as a straightforward attack on a formal problem: to make a large painting that retained movement and life. He found few predecessor paintings and no contemporary paintings that could serve as successful models."

pieces since his early days, which have a similar large-canvas impact on the viewer but involve a different approach and process for the artist.

Before 1988, Marden had never worked on canvases that could not be carried with him from location to location, and the size increase forced him to explore more intensely and intimately a journey contained within the canvas edge because of the immobility of the canvas and workspace. The scale required great physical stamina and whole body movements to make large strokes, and the variety of motion made the process look like a dance. Marden leads the brush and paint while the materials respond with their own qualities under his direction so that the idiosyncrasies of Marden's natural movements are reflected to some extent in the painting. The life Marden worried about losing in the painting's size was not lost; on the contrary, he infused the painting with his own life and energy.

Jackson Pollock, Marden's American Hero

We cannot completely summarize Marden's package of influences without giving due weight to Jackson Pollock, whose work Marden greatly admired and returned to often to study and contemplate. He strongly identifies with Pollock's work and defends it with an ardor expected from an artist defending his own work. Marden calls him a hero, "specifically American," and an example of an artist who successfully produced "an astonishing wide range of different things," even when the critics and public seemed to be afraid and hesitant to accept change (Richardson 40-41). Much of the vocabulary Marden uses to talk about Pollock's work translates to concepts in his own work. For example, Marden discusses the "energy drawn into [Pollock's] *One*" that comes from "the physical energy it took to make the mark" and "the intense energy that comes out of the painting" (Richardson 42). This energy strives toward the

metaphysical aspects of painting that Marden approaches in combining drawing and painting; what he calls Pollock's "*drawn* painting." The thoughtfully drafted layers are so finely crafted that ground becomes the canvas and figure dances and swirls in and out of it, as if "layer" is too mechanical a term to describe the effect.

Additionally, Marden had started to experiment with lengthened brush handles, and sometimes he used sticks for drawing. The sticks were purposefully selected; Marden required a specific weight and feel, and with them he ceded an amount of control to nature and gravity. John Stomberg finds the extended handle different from, yet analogous to, Pollock's methods: "As the paint left Pollock's brush (or stick or can) it flowed down toward the canvas in a trajectory determined by the gestures of Pollock's wrist, arm, and body, but in concert with the undeniable force of gravity" (Stomberg 47). This combination of artist's intention and natural forces is the same balance in Marden's long brushes; it "answers to the artist's will but not without some resistance, not without asserting some manner inherent to its nature into the creation of the lines" (Stomberg 47).

Journey to Cold Mountain

The calligraphic outlines of *Cold Mountain I (Path)* are the clearest and least complicated by swirling gray lines of all the pieces in the set. Eight columns arranged in groups of two (four couplets) create visual division, and yet the lines are difficult to trace; the eye starts to follow one and ends up sliding to another before following the first to completion (see *Figures 2-7*). The shades of gray vacillate between light, medium, and dark throughout the canvas as well as along individual lines, all placed on a subtly shifting background of grays, browns, and shadowy blues. All six paintings shift within a similar and constrained color palette, yet look and feel different

from each other. Marden varies the ground grays, greens, and blues to evoke mood changes or natural season cycles or varying mindsets. The artist works comfortably under constraints, like this limited color palette. John Stomberg considers a spiritual connection within these limitations, saying that Marden finds “freedom in the aesthetic monasticism of severely limited forms and colors” (Stomberg 41). This ascetic-like control is especially appropriate for the *Cold Mountain* paintings, which allude to Han-shan, his ascetic mountain lifestyle, and short, restrained poetry. Moreover, Marden realized after the project was well under way the striking similarity of his palette and those of Chinese landscapes paintings, not only a meaningful accident but evidence of Marden’s intuitive relationship with his Eastern influences³⁰.

Marden explains that no part of this series directly corresponds to specific Han-shan poems; he does not create a written language to communicate precise words. “It’s not a form of writing. I’m not trying to make a language. I think of Chinese calligraphy as simply the way I see it, not knowing the language...But if someone translates a piece for me, and I hear the relationships I am affected by that” (Interview with Pat Steir). Instead, the abstract energy that exudes from these large canvases most closely corresponds to the emotional experience of the Han-shan poems, connected to Marden’s initial response to visualizing the poems in Chinese at once with the English versions: a blending of intellectual meaning with intuitive reaction.

³⁰ See page 65 of Brenda Richardson’s text: “When asked if he thought of the limited, neutral colors of Chinese painting while the palette of the *Cold Mountain* paintings emerged, Marden responded that it occurred to him only about three-quarters of the way through. ‘One day I thought to myself, ‘isn’t it interesting that they are looking like the color you find in Chinese paintings.’ I had not thought of that at the beginning. I just decided to limit the palette because I didn’t want to run into a lot of color problems. A few years ago I did a group of eleven paintings in which I worked through issues of color by doing specific sets of variations. For these new paintings I wanted a complexity in terms of drawing. I felt that I was more on top of drawing now, and I wanted to explore it further. And then this color just evolved.”

Despite Marden's declaration that no painting relates directly to a specific poem, it is necessary to compare the two more closely. Three of the six paintings have specific subtitles: 1 (Path), 5 (Open), and 6 (Bridge). The first visual image in Snyder's translations is the "path, but no sign of cart or horse," and so appropriately we access Marden's series via the path, and the criss-crossing couplets suggests that it's unmarked and untraveled, easy to lose "the shortcut home" (RRCM 37). The ground color is mostly white, as it is in *Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)*, the last in the series, subtlety suggesting a life's cycle. Snyder's poems frequently refer back to the difficulties of isolated trekking while simultaneously reveling in the natural surroundings and spiritual discoveries they inspire. Likewise, Marden's paintings illustrate the tangles and complications of decision-making; and the slight changes in light and shadow as well as line thickness communicate vacillations between hardship and fulfillment.

While Snyder's poems contain no mention of a bridge, the last painting's subtitle loosely relates to the last line of the "Cold Mountain" poems: "Try and make it to Cold Mountain." Marden's version offers a bridge to his viewers, even though the individual must "make it" alone. The reserved color palette references seasonal changes and wind and trees that could correspond with Snyder's "hill of pines" and "leaves of mist," but the restrained palette also reflects a spiritual idea. The ascetic-like control, which Marden practiced throughout his career, is his "means to cut down senseless craving" (RRCM 51) and arrive at an enlightened awareness of the world.

Part of the beauty of the *Cold Mountain* paintings comes with the open reference possibilities. The waving lines become branches and wind patterns or figures entwined in sensual energy or the outline of a life's journey or an illustration of human and nature coexisting, like Han-shan in the T'ien-tai Mountains. The paint is applied in layers and thinned often with

terpineol to create a translucent ebb and flow of pigment. Marden employed a knife to scrape away paint where he felt it should be thinner, lighter, or just to erase part of it. “There is as much sureness in the terpineol erasure as there is in the Vine Black brush stroke, as much certainty in the retraction as in the action” (Richardson 82). Stomberg astutely observes in a footnote to his essay that Marden’s layered deletions depart from calligraphic mark-making. An accomplished calligrapher never erases; “the ability to make each line with only one pass is one of the most basic criteria for quality” (Stomberg 49). Marden’s erasures “merge Western writing tradition” (49) with calligraphic motion to achieve the *Cold Mountain* amalgamation. Though decidedly not part of the Eastern calligraphic tradition, the deletions nonetheless are integral to his work and separate his painter’s mark from the writer’s script. The scrapes signal the multiplicity of decisions involved in painting and create the metaphoric character of his lines; we can see them as a journey or pathways, hinting at the route to Enlightenment.

The process of adding and removing over and over does not make the final painting feel labored or heavy-handed. Quite the opposite, all six paintings possess light, translucence, and a sincere openness that is concealed in Marden’s early paintings. The *Dylan Painting*, for example, feels mysterious, as if keeping the heart of it well hidden in the thickness of wax and color. The viewer is invited to find it, tries to coax it out, but often does not succeed and is left feeling melancholy and lonely. Little coaxing is necessary with the *Cold Mountains*; the viewer looks at them and, because of their size, is surrounded by their heart, or perhaps their “hsin,” the Chinese term that defines the concept of “heart-mind,” the sum of one’s entire emotional and intellectual identity; a concept not easily defined in English but residing at the very center of Buddhist philosophy and Eastern culture. The lines start to move; they wax and wane and seem

confused at times. “They are journeys, each rich and largely unpredictable, much as is life”
(Stomberg 52).

Paintings from:

Brice Marden—Cold Mountain. Dia Center for the Arts. Walker Art Center. The Menil Collection. Texas: Houston Fine Art Press, 1992.

Brice Marden, Paintings & Drawings. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992.

Figure 1; Thira, 1979-80
Oil and wax on canvas
96 X 180 inches (18 panels)

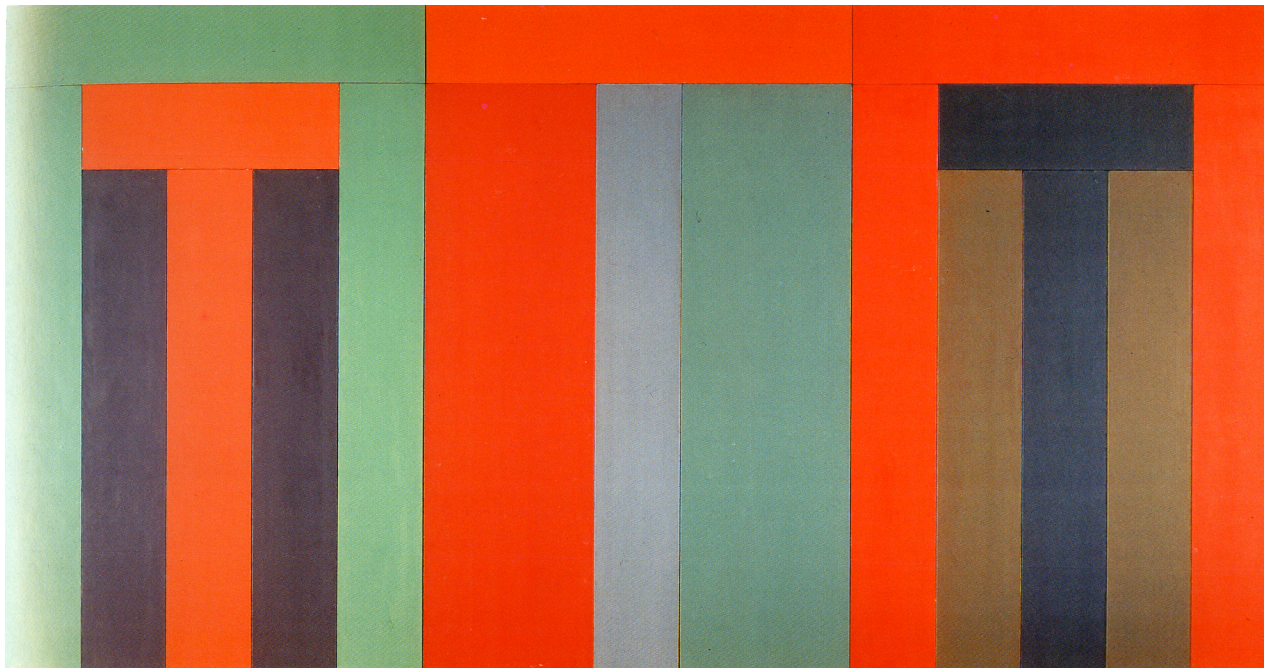


Figure 2

Cold Mountain 1 (Path) 1988-89
Oil on linen
108 X 144 inches

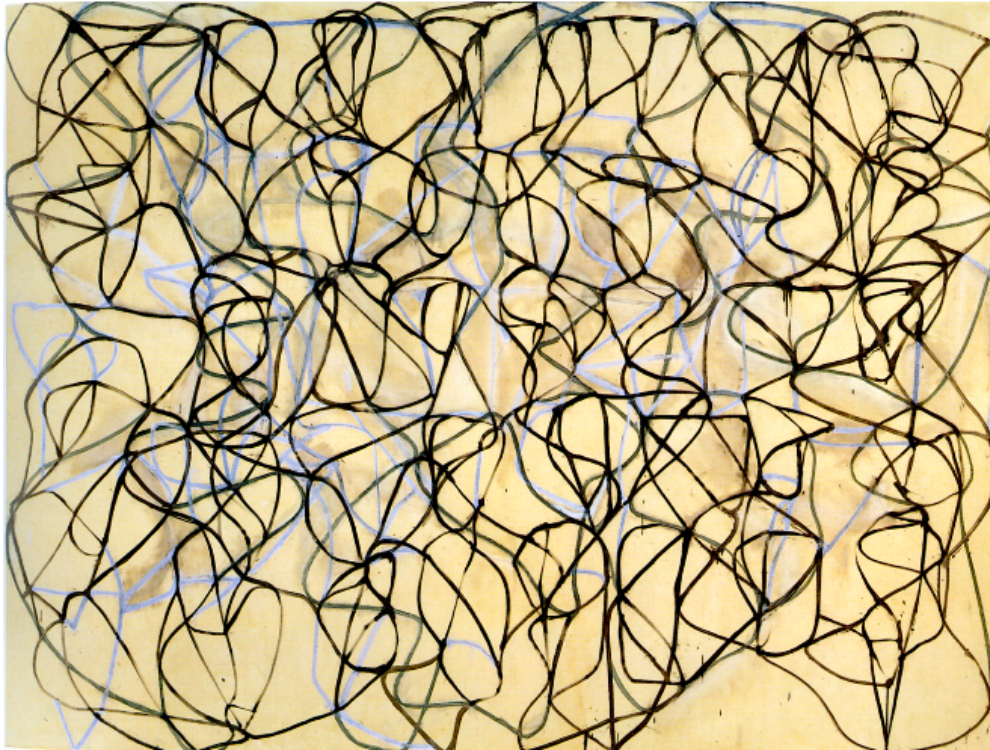


Figure 3

Cold Mountain 2, 1989-91
Oil on linen
108 X 144 inches



Figure 4



Cold Mountain 3, 1989-91
Oil on linen
108 X 144 in.

Figure 5



Cold Mountain 4, 1989-91
Oil on linen
108 X 144 in.

Figure 6

Cold Mountain 5 (Open), 1989-91
Oil on linen
108 X 144 in.

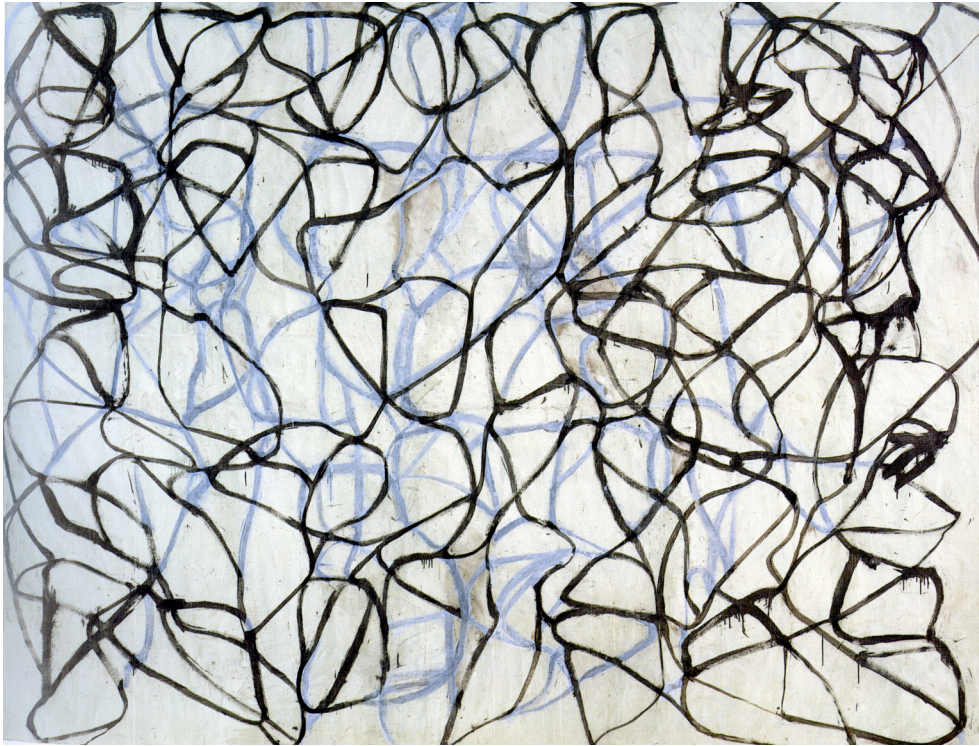


Figure 7

Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge), 1989-91
Oil on linen
108 X 144 in.



Conclusion: “Try and make it to Cold Mountain.”

Many critics who have reflected on Eastern art and its influence on Western thinkers and artists acknowledge an intangible, ephemeral “something” that often comes from Asia. This thing is difficult to describe and speaks more to our hearts than our heads. In a recent article in *Art in America*, Edward Gómez reviews “The Third Mind” exhibit at the Guggenheim, defining one goal of the show: to examine “how a large segment of Western art evolved from handcrafted objects that depict particular subjects into something intangible instead—transient experiences whose purpose is to provoke a shift in a viewer’s consciousness” (Gómez 60)³¹. Gómez observes that as one progresses through the exhibit, which features American works from 1860 through 1989, the “physical forms...paintings, drawings or sculptures” dissolve “into little more than ephemeral events or, sometimes, the varied forms of documentation...that record their occurrences” (Gómez 60). Brice Marden had a few of his “Cold Mountain Studies” (1988-1990) included in the exhibit. These works are similar to the six-part “Cold Mountain” series, but are smaller in scale (8 x 9½ inches) and lack the complex layering of background color. And for a one-time addition to the exhibit, Snyder participated in a poetry reading in which he performed several of his “Cold Mountain Poems.”

The exhibit explores the broader ideas and questions related to this essay: the nature of the East-West intellectual and artistic relationship, its history and evolution, and the balance of Eastern and Western aesthetics and philosophy. It includes a variety of media: paintings, sculptures, film, installations, music, and others that indicate the necessity of exploring this relationship across disciplines. Just as one Western translator’s version of an Eastern work

³¹ Gómez, Edward M. “Altered States.” *Art in America*. April 2009. Pages 59-65.

cannot possibly define completely Asian culture, one medium cannot holistically express the effects of Eastern aesthetics on Western art. To gain understanding of this impact, we must connect the arts and extract the “pure language” in all of them, as the “The Third Mind” urges us to do.

Western translations of Eastern works reveal more about the particular culture and background of the translator than about Eastern culture. Snyder’s *Cold Mountain*, even with his Chinese language knowledge, integration in Buddhist society, and careful translation process, is still necessarily different from Han-shan’s T’ien-t’ai. Unlike Han-shan writing from isolation, Snyder was surrounded with mentors, teachers, and a close circle of friends. Timothy Gray notes that in the “Riprap” poems that accompany the twenty-four “Cold Mountain” poems Snyder “is more interested in local landscapes that complicate notions of individuality than he is with the diffusion of culture,” and this attitude carries over to his approach to translation (Gray 103). Snyder’s translations feel authentic and accurate not because accuracy and cultural representation were at the forefront of his mind, but because his primary interests (physical labor, landscape, meditation) aligned naturally with those ideas expressed in Han-shan’s poetry. Snyder wrote that at first, Professor Ch’en, for whose class he was translating, found the poems too “experimental and wild,” lacking the austere tranquility of the originals (Gray 132). The professor soon revised his opinion, citing Snyder’s “gift for plain American speech” and therefore releasing Snyder to freely explore translation as he would, fusing his reality with Han-shan’s literary foundation (Gray 132). Snyder calls into question the line between Eastern and Western culture because, in view of the way he lives his life, there isn’t one. This realization that the East-West line has eroded and possibly doesn’t exist in every case is documented in “The Third Mind” exhibit.

Nineteenth-century paintings like John La Farge's *The Last Waterlilies*, a watercolor representation of the flower he encountered in Japan, are easily interpreted as Western paintings of Eastern landscapes and objects. But as the timeline progresses and these paintings slide further into modern historical memory we remember artists like Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, probing deeper into the relationship in the looser terms of American Abstract Expressionism. From here we find Brice Marden's and others' calligraphic revelations, though these weaving canvas lines, as we know, are not boxed in by their four edges; they reference universal truths about what it means to be human, comment on the nature of production, and include conversation with Eastern influences. These artists employ a conglomerate of Eastern and Western techniques to represent traits found in each culture separately, as well as universal ideals. Because Eastern and Western techniques and philosophies are woven tightly together, the final products are difficult to define, residing in a historically non-existent space, much like Snyder's "Cold Mountain" translations as discussed in chapter one.

Gómez notes non-traditional pieces like "Robert Irwin's untitled white disc that seems to float in front of a wall (1969) and James Turrell's *Sojourn* (2006), a glowing blue rectangle of projected light that hovers in a darkened space, teasing viewers with the "permanence of its immateriality" (Gómez 64). Works like these focus on "consciousness itself" while communicating one perceived Asian characteristic instead of attempting to unlock Chinese culture completely for a western audience, obviously an impossible task. Compare this mode to the ideas surrounding Pound's Chinese interpretations: that one could possess a key to the East, unlock the door and lift the veil from the mystery. But realistically, Pound's poems are the result of an individual's misunderstandings and projections presented through polished poetry, not an

accurate representation of Chinese culture. In hindsight, the *Cathay* poems function as a mirror reflecting back on the author and readers, not as a window into China.

The motivating desire to pursue intellectual and artistic cross-cultural connections is related to a much larger, much more existential pondering of what it means to be alive and human. Artist Alison Knowles, also featured in “The Third Mind,” says that Asia is the source of something “timeless and eternal,” and Yoko Ono believes that Asia is still mysterious to Westerners (Gómez 65). Whereas the unknown, undefinable aspect of Asian art and philosophy used to be a source of discomfort, compelling outsiders to speculate, project, and define, Knowles and Ono seem to imply that now those mysteries are comforting.

Why this shift nearly 100 years after *Cathay*? Ad Reinhardt, making art in the middle of the 20th century, found comfort in “pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is...ideal, transcendent.” These were the terms he used to describe his series of subtle black paintings that he believed combined “Eastern and Western pure painting” (Object Labels)³². Marden also found comfort and renewed inspiration in Asian sources where he noticed a profound acknowledgement of the importance of personal experience and journey. He says that “Chinese...paintings and drawings evolved in a kind of inspired state....there’s usually somebody in the picture undergoing some sort of experience, or on a pilgrimage towards an experience” (Richardson 52). So the pull of Asian art appears to be a meditative state that transcends reality, espouses metaphysical language through ideal form, and prompts the artist and viewer to separate themselves from reality, entering the ultimate state of awareness. John Stomberg notes that “in Chinese aesthetics, Marden’s chief

³² “Object Labels for the Exhibition.” *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*. Traditional Fine Arts Organization, Inc. 2008. Online. Accessed May 2009. <<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/8aa/8aa388.htm>>.

source, the spirit, that unseen and elusive aspect of art, has been considered the first principle of art...since before the sixth century” (Stomberg 49). And so the non-object orientation of Chinese art, the metaphysical, is a relief for American modern artists concerned with material things and their decay. At its base, Americans are interested in Asia because we’re curious about varied responses to the world and its dilemmas, and Asian artists often bring a refreshing perspective to existential pondering, a view not previously considered.

This discussion of meaningful metaphysical communication shares similarities with the translation process, which requires a communal connection between author and translator so that the intangible essence of the original work that exists outside the boundaries of expressed language remains intact in the translation. When situated in these terms, Chinese painting and poetry strive to translate eternal truths, capturing their essence to communicate to others. Brenda Richardson tells us that Chinese landscape painting, for example, “is not about objective reality” but “about the relationship between man and nature, about man in nature, and” most importantly “about nature’s power to effect spiritual transformation of man” (Richardson 48). This analysis aligns with the assessment of Chinese art that says it focuses more on the spiritual realm than the material, and often uses nature as a stable force that contains or leads to eternal truths. So we understand the verbal trek through Cold Mountain in Snyder’s translations to emphasize the natural space, the “hill of pines,” “the rising sun,” the “white clouds” and “blue sky,” “the touch of rain” like a traditional landscape painting does. Throughout the 24 poems, the speaker experiences a spiritual awakening, leading to “no more tangled, hung-up mind” (RRCM 55). Marden’s *Cold Mountain* emphasizes the winding journey of a mind waiting to be untangled still, passing through seasons engaging in the process of life. Richardson notes that the paintings are most powerful when viewed together; “there is an undeniable sense in which

Cold Mountain is a single work....resolution may converge in a lifetime but not likely in a single painting” (Richardson 80-81). For Richardson, the series is a metaphor for a lifetime and its complexities, questioning, and progression.

As a painter, light is Marden’s subject. Color does not exist without light, “without light there is no visible image,” he says (Richardson 79). Light then, is more important than color in painting, and indeed the light in *Cold Mountain* defines its shadows, creates the life. The fifth piece in the series is subtitled “(*Open*),” and in this one especially the shadowy blue lines underneath the darker brown-black lines seem to be backlit. Near the center of the canvas, the twisting foreground loosens from its tighter windings around the edges and leaves larger openings through which to view the bluish background. It is a relief or moment of clarification, like “sleep[ing] by the creek [to] purify my ears (RRCM 48).

Snyder’s last poem in the series ends with the speaker’s admonishing “those I meet,” to “Try and make it to Cold Mountain” (RRCM 60). And in their own ways, Snyder, Marden, the artists included in “The Third Mind” exhibit, and others less publicly strive for that, using their artistic endeavors to light the path. Often their output still functions like a mirror instead of a window, but a mirror that reflects more than individual perceptions, that instead illuminates the process of participating in life and finds comfort in transcending the East-West line.

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